

“Simple, But Not Easy” a sermon by The Rev. Keenan Kelsey October 26, 2008  
Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church (USA)

TEXT: Matthew 22:34-46 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ‘Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ He said to him, ‘ “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.” On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.’ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ‘What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David.’ He said to them, ‘How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’ ”? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Simple, but not easy, That phrase ended the sermon two weeks ago, during which I talked about this Great Commandment as Jesus’ interpretation, or summary, of the Ten Commandments. That sermon was talking about our very human and very real need for regulations, for guidance, for directional signals and signposts in our lives.

But apparently that was only part one of that sermon. Because I kept wondering, what does that look like? How do you actually live into that commandment, that simple, but oh so difficult and complex commandment?

This love stuff is tough stuff, filled with exhortations to forgiveness and generosity and kindness and patience and sacrifice and surrender and repentance...Remember what Paul wrote: whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, think on these things. Rejoice in God, let your gentleness be known to everyone.

What does it really mean to love God? That is, to love the One who is love...the One whose love enables us to love? Is it loving the things of this earth, this life, more? Is it the loving of others? Is it something deeper still?

And How are we to love ourselves? We hear so much about being humble, about being self-less, that for many, loving one’s self is an uncomfortable thought.

And what about those neighbors. This seems our call to action, but can you command love? Can you actually learn to look on every person in your path with love? Let’s go back to that scene with Jesus. The religious authorities in the temple didn’t like Jesus very much. It wasn’t just because he challenged their teachings so regularly – as Karen reminded us, they were used to theological interplay. It was because he stumped them. He constantly interrupted, interfered, interposed, leaving them confused, even

speechless. At one point shortly before the exchange we heard today, they almost shouted at him, who do you think you are? What are you doing here? By whose authority do you teach? That's what is behind the question in the middle of today's reading: Is this David's son or what? It causes them to struggle, just as it should cause us to struggle. Simple isn't easy.

We know that Jesus answered the scribes with two verses from Hebrew Scripture: Deut. 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18. Familiar verses to the Pharisees, but Jesus put them together so that the love of God, and neighbor, and self, are not only inseparable but non-hierarchical. Each has equal importance.

But still what does Jesus mean?

Simply put, I think he means that God wants us to rejoice and to live in gratitude and awe, and to thrive; and in turn we are to want others, all others, to thrive just as we want ourselves to thrive.

Some of us excel at loving God with our souls. We can work up a lot of enthusiasm and real emotional fervor. We can get just transported by a hymn or choir anthem, or a sermon or a prayer. But when it comes to loving others, we are critical, always looking for a flaw, always willing to put in our two cents worth, never letting a mistake pass us by. Others of us can love God with our minds, but not much else. We can think through a claim from the Scripture, and give our intellectual assent. We believe in the good sense of our arguments, but our hearts are not in it. It is meant for someone else. Some of us love God with heart and mind, but we don't put any muscle, any soul, into it. We love God when it is convenient, when we're not too tired, or busy, or when we have a little extra money or time. And some of us remember all the people we love, our parents, our children, families, friends, and neglect to act in ways that show we love God first. And how many of us conveniently forget that to love neighbors means to love our enemies as well. We forget that the commandment not multiple choice—we can't pick one answer at any one time just because it suits us.

Then we love ourselves. Some of us balk at the concept of "loving" ourselves - but I think we get too egotistical about what that means. It seems to me that we need to be at ease with who we are, to recognize in ourselves the belovedness that gives us worth. It is basic self respect: not self-centered, but rather a lovely right-sized humility that allows us to belong, to feel neither one up nor one down, but equal, embracing, and embraced. Writer Anais Nin said it better than I can: "And the day came when the risk to remain tight in a bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom." God wants us to blossom.

And, as we claim our belovedness, we are asked to turn to our neighbors and afford them this same love. Not some of the time, but all of the time; not some of the people but all of the people. It is the response to living in God's love.. The One who loves me in spite of those things that often make me hard to love, asks me, not necessarily to love every other person, but certainly to act in a loving way.

The original Hebrew from Leviticus literally reads "You are not to take vengeance; you are not to retain-anger against the sons of your kin people - but be-loving to your neighbor (as one) like yourself, I am YHWH!" That means that loving is an action, not an emotion. The command is not so much TO LOVE one another, but rather to ACT IN A LOVING WAY towards one another. In Greek as well, "love" is an active verb. Jesus did not command feeling, he commanded action.

Ours is the work of doing the next right thing, moment after moment after moment, without looking too far in the future. We are asked to love God and love others as ourselves, and leaving the rest to God.

I want to tell you a fable – one I told at Jazz Vespers the other night, so those who were there, forgive me! It is about a young girl who found a butterfly in the garden.... The beautiful creature had one wing impaled by a thorn. Very carefully, so as not to further damage the wing, she released the butterfly from the thorn and it began to fly away.

Then, the butterfly came back and changed into a beautiful fairy princess right before the little girl. "For your kindness," the fairy told the little girl, "I will grant you your fondest wish." The little girl thought for a moment and replied, "I want to be happy."

The fairy princess smiled and leaned over and whispered something into the girl's ear. Then, the fairy princess vanished into thin air. But, as the girl grew older, there was no one in the kingdom who was happier than she. Whenever anyone asked her for the secret of her happiness, she would only smile and say, "I listened to a beautiful fairy princess."

As she reached the last years of her life, her friends and neighbors were afraid that her fabulous secret of happiness would die with her. "Tell us, please," they asked. "Tell us what the fairy said!"

The little girl, who was now a lovely old lady, smiled and said, "The beautiful fairy princess told me that the secret to happiness is to realize that everyone, no matter how secure they seem, has need of me."

One of the great secrets of life is to realize that everyone has need of us. And the willingness to give ourselves to others ... the willingness to develop a relationship with others the willingness to love others, is one of the rules of living ... which leads to a happy life.

We are all needed in this world. Everyone has need of us. We each have a gift to being, a task to do, and it all has to do with love. Worship is part of our call -- Worshipping Jesus is quite literally "to ascribe him worth", but Christianity fails, utterly fails, when we focus more on worshipping Jesus than on behaving like him. This Great Commandment requires us to let go of our focus on each other's differences and behaviors and to accept each other as equally necessary to God's world. Without judgment, even when we

disagree, We are called to realize that we are each a part of a whole, and that God sees and uses every one of us to a greater good.

And that greater good gets decided anew every day. Christianity also fails when we put all our revelation into the past tense, behind us where we can look at it, boxed in a book with inflexible language only we can rightly interpret. In order to live by the word, we must believe that the word is living. And to believe or even assume that God is living and active in our world is to believe that God is not finished with any of us.

The religious leaders of Jesus' day were so busy interpreting the past they failed to see the incarnation right in front of them. As a pastor serving in a declining denomination, I know that Jesus words are aimed at the heart of any ministry, that doubts that God can do anything new or who deny that God calls us to renewal.

Right now we at Noe Valley Ministry are excited about our church – we spent all day yesterday inviting people to join us. This is how we will thrive. Too many churches invite people only so they can count the numbers on Sunday. What I loved was that we are inviting people because we love our community, we love what we are teaching and doing and how we care for one another. Most of us feel that we are better people for being part of this church. If we ever become more interested in increasing numbers than we are in creating community and seeking justice, we need to recall Jesus' challenge and put ourselves in the place of the Pharisees – we need always practice what we preach. The religious leaders of the gospel are any of us, in any time, who believe that God's activity is all past tense, or who believe that the Spirit has nothing new to renew in us.

We are all talking about change this political season, the lessons of Jesus teach us that change comes slowly, but that it does come. It comes through people who are about the business of meeting people's needs – their basic needs. In meeting those needs for others, they see the pain and the hurt in the world and from that observation change finally takes place, as their lives change. And if we can do that for ourselves and for those around us, even (or especially) the ones we don't really like, then we will make a big change in our world.

The startling and elegant thing in Jesus' response to the lawyer's question is his assertion that loving one's neighbor is alike to loving God. This is not so much a second great commandment as it is a description of how the greatest commandment can be fulfilled. We love God, Jesus says, we serve God best by loving, by serving, others. By serving other people we keep God alive in us.

Rejoice in our God always. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in Jesus Christ, and the God of Peace will be with you.